

# GE1137 Movies and Psychology - Discussions

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## Psychoanalysis - "Life of Pi" (2012)

(1) A very large part of the movie is about the shipwreck experience of Pi with several animals on a life boat. At the end, Pi offered another version of the story, what are the correspondences between the two stories?

The first story is a beautified and psychologically acceptable narrative for Pi, where he survives alongside a tiger and enjoys a symbolic adventure. The second story reveals the brutal truth he cannot face. The correspondences between them include: the zebra for the injured sailor, the hyena for the cruel cook, the orangutan for his mother, and the tiger, Richard Parker, for Pi's own fierce will to survive. In extreme situations, the human Id—the primal instinct—emerges. In reality, Pi may have resorted to cannibalism, including eating his mother, to survive. In the beautified version, this horrific survival instinct is projected onto Richard Parker.

(2) Pi was facing different Psychological conflicts in the two stories (based on the ideas of id, ego, and superego), what are they (i.e. the conflict in each story)? Which one you think is more stressful? How did Pi overcome them?

The Tiger Story shows conflict that Pi faces primal Id, which are instincts for survival, hunger and aggression represented by Richard Parker. Tiger embodies Pi's own basic needs. Pi battles his superego which are internalised morality, guilt and societal rules. His superego tells him killing other living being like the fish is wrong, he should maintain his humanity and vegetarianism. The conflict is between giving in to savage instincts, Id, to live or adhering to his moral code, superego, and potentially dying. Pi uses his ego to mediate, kill and eat for survival but does it with prayer and guilt. The Man Story centers on the ego facing overwhelming trauma. Pi experiences extreme human cruelty, like the cook killing and eating people. The conflict is between the ego's need to survive mentally and physically, and the sheer nature of reality. Pi copes by dissociating and withdrawing into his mind. The Man Story is more stressful as it confronts Pi with utter loss of human decency and his core belief in human goodness. Witnessing humans descending into cannibalism attacks his understanding of the world.

(3) How can we describe the relationship between Pi and Richard Parker in Freud's terms (e.g., id, ego, and defense mechanisms)?

Richard Parker represents id. As our basic instincts involve survival, which is the main driver of people's personality. In the movie, Richard Parker kills the hyena in order to satisfy hunger, which is the basic condition of survival. Pi functions as the ego, the reality principle balancing id impulses with external demands. He devises practical strategies—training Parker with a whistle, demarcating territory with urine, and establishing feeding

routines to channel the tiger's ferocity productively. This taming process illustrates ego strength: Pi asserts dominance while avoiding direct confrontation, negotiating coexistence on the lifeboat. His religious rituals further bolster ego resilience, providing structure among chaos. Pi's superego, which absorbed morals from his Hindu, Christian, and Muslim faiths, clashes with the id and shows up as guilt about killing. Pi uses projection as a coping mechanism, projecting his barbaric tendencies onto Parker in order to deny brutality. While sublimation focuses id energy on survival tasks like solar stills or storytelling, repression buries traumatic memories. Parker's prusten indicates an id-superego truce under ego guidance, and their bond peaks in mutual dependence. Parker's departure without saying goodbye at the end of the journey represents ego integration: Pi has subdued his id and emerged whole.

(4) Do you think if there is anything illogical in each of the two stories? (if so, please explain with examples)

The story with the tiger is illogical in a biological way in different scenes. A bengal tiger would not share a boat with others without attacking, any other living creatures will be considered a food source to it in the situation. Also, It is not possible for a predator/ large size animal to survive 227 days with the limited food shown in the movie. While the second story seems logical where all survivors matched with the animals in the first story, there are still some flaws. Firstly, during the narration of the first story, it is told that bananas couldn't float but Pi did not change this detail during the narration of the second story. Also, it is told that the cook ate a mouse which shows his cruelty but the orangutan which implies Pi's mother after being killed was not eaten which doesn't seem logical.

(5) Someone says both stories are not entirely correct. The truth is that Pi ate his mother to survive. What is the evidence you can find to support this view (free sharing)? If so, why it would be so intolerable according to Freud?

The island which Pi found lots of meerkats on looks like a female who is lying. Pi ate seaweed on the island and collected lots of resources from the island before leaving. If the island is referring to the only female, Pi's mother, then his mother may probably have died already (so that the female looks like lying). The plot of Pi eating seaweed can refer to Pi eating his mother. The superego of Pi does not allow him to eat humans, especially his mother. However, since Pi is facing a serious survival problem, his id encourages him to do so. After that, Pi feels regretful since he has overcome the survival problem and his superego comes back, leading him to feel guilty.

## **Emotion - "The Silence of the Lambs" (1991)**

(1) This movie has received international acclaim (well received across countries) and is considered belonging to the horror genre. What are the elements in the movie that arouse universal fear? (min. 3 examples)

Firstly, the scenes of being stalked, trapped and to be skinned by the murder creates the feel of horror and fear. Secondly, every scene between Clarice and Hannibal's conversation is like speaking to a monster. Also, the design of the prison makes us feel very stifled and overwrought. As the stone hallway lined with the other inmates who

attacked suddenly. Thirdly, the gunfight scene in Buffalo Bills' house is absolutely filled with fear due to the hunting and chasing under darkness.

(2) What do you think about the soundtrack and the flow of the scenes? Any observations? Any effect on you as an audience?

The soundtracks appeared in the right timing according to the plot. For example, in the last part of the film, Buffalo Bill was wearing girls' clothes and amusing himself with a happy background music. It brought out the craziness of Buffalo Bill. Moreover, Clarice was founding Buffalo Bill and the background music started to have more drums when she was near Buffalo Bill. It brought anxiety and pressure to the audience, leading them to be worried about Clarice's dangerous situation.

(3) What do you think is the root of the fear deep down in the heart of Clarice Starling? How did she manage to get over it?

In the film, Clarice reveals her childhood trauma to Hannibal. Her father was killed while pursuing criminals. Having lost her mother at a young age, her father was a symbolic figure to her. His death instilled in her a deep obsession with justice, leaving her haunted by guilt and the terror of being powerless to protect the innocent. This fear drives her to prove she can act decisively when lives are at stake. She begins to move past it not by erasing the trauma, but by confronting it—sharing the story with Hannibal Lecter and then risking her life to rescue Catherine Martin. In saving Catherine, Clarice transforms her guilt into purpose, showing that she can face fear and still choose courage. At the end of the film, Hannibal asks Clarice, "Did the lamb stop screaming?" This implies that, to some extent, by saving Catherine—the only surviving victim in the Buffalo Bill case—and killing Buffalo Bill, Clarice has fulfilled her inner pursuit of justice and overcomes her childhood trauma. However, Hannibal's escape leaves her unable to find complete closure.

(4) According to Walters (2004), a good horror movie possesses three key features. Can you apply them to this movie?

According to Walters, a good horror movie needs tension, relevance, and unrealism. First, the movie has tension. It uses dark lighting and silence to make the viewers nervous. For instance, in the climax, when Clarice hunts the killer in his pitch-black basement. The camera forces the viewers to see through her eyes, making viewers scared of what might be hiding in the dark. Also, the movie has relevance. It connects to our real-world fears, and the dangers that women face. Clarice is a young woman who wants to succeed in a male-dominated FBI, but the villain targets women. So it makes the horror feel possible, not just a fantasy. Last but not least, the movie has unrealism. The setting is realistic, but Lecter is like a monster in human skin. He has superman intelligence and ability to escape, which make him larger than life. This exaggeration reminds the viewers that this is just a movie.

(5) Do you think "Excitation Transfer", "Curiosity/Fascination", and "Dispositional Alignment" theories can explain why this horror movie became popular? Why or why not? (please comment on each of these three theories)

I think those theories can explain why this horror movie became popular. Excitation transfer: It means that the enjoyment of cinematic horror was higher during the movie than at the end, at the end of the movie, for example the scene at first, Clarice meeting with Hannibal Lecter, and at the end they cooperate together and finally find who is buffalo bill. Curiosity/Fascination: It means that Violation of social norms, outside the viewer's everyday experience, also not all viewers enjoy seeing violators in the movie not being punished. Some of the audiences may be interested in the violation of social norms, for example the movie talks about changing the skin of people, or killing people, some viewers may be attracted by those scenes. Dispositional Alignment: It means that violence directed to someone considered deserving of it or innocent, also can only explain which episode of a horror movie is more acceptable. For example, in the last scene, Clarice killed the buffalo bill, viewers may think he was deserving of the violence, and the emotional alignment with the character may play a crucial role for engaging viewers.

## Mental Illness - "A Beautiful Mind" (2001)

(1) We discussed some criteria for abnormal behaviors, how do they fit with Nash's behaviors during his study in college?

- Deviance: When Nash is studying in college, he is a weird guy, and bad at socializing, so he has no friends when he is studying in college, he always avoids group work, and focuses on maths alone. Nash went beyond norms, and made him get hints of emerging schizoid traits.
- Dysfunction: This abnormal behavior is not quite fit for Nash behavior while he is studying in college. He got a PHD at 21, although he cannot meet friends, but he is adapting by focusing on work, also it didn't affect Nash work or life, he became really dysfunctional after he got married.
- Danger: This abnormal behavior is not fit for Nash when he is studying in college. Nash pranks are mischievous and not dangerous, he didn't hurt others or himself, he became really dangerous after he got married.

(2) Following Q.1 above, how can those criteria be applied to Nash's life after getting married? (min. 3 examples)

1. After Nash married, he develops elaborate delusions of being recruited by the government to decode Soviet messages, believing he is pursued by agents; this markedly deviates from societal reality (deviance), prevents him from maintaining his teaching job and family duties (dysfunction), and leads him to chase imaginary foes across campus, endangering himself and others (danger).
2. Nash develops elaborate delusions of being recruited by the government to decode Soviet messages, believing he is pursued by agents; this markedly deviates from societal reality (deviance), prevents him from maintaining his teaching job and family duties (dysfunction), and leads him to chase imaginary foes across campus, endangering himself and others (danger).

3. When his medication is reduced because of side effects, his symptoms return with uncontrollable impulses related to his "top-secret mission," defying logic (deviance), making it impossible for him to work and go about his everyday life (dysfunction), and causing erratic behaviors that endanger his and his wife's safety (danger).

(3) Based on what we have covered in the lecture, what are the possible factors that contribute to Nash's disorder?

John Nash's schizophrenia is portrayed as a combination of high-stress environmental factors and social isolations. From a biopsychosocial perspective, stressors in the environment is one of the causes of Nash's schizophrenia. Nash obsession with original and groundbreaking work. And the intense competition at Princeton. All these factors placed immense pressure on him. Besides, his inability to form meaningful relationships fostered a lonely, isolated environment, which undoubtedly worsened his mental disorder.

(4) What type of schizophrenia is shown by Nash in the movie? What are the features that support your diagnosis? What was the "reason" / turning point that Nash finally convinced himself that he had problems?

Paranoid schizophrenia. Nash thought there were three humans (i.e., Charles, William and Marcee) following him. However, these three humans were only his delusions and did not appear in the real world. The turning point of John convinced himself to have problems is that he found out that his behaviour hurt his family. He deeply regretted it and then realised that the little girl (Marcie, one of his delusions) had never grown up. He found out that they were delusions and decided to ignore them in order to maintain a normal life.

(5) How do you think about the role of Alicia in Nash's life? What are the right things she has done as a family member of a schizophrenia patient? (min. 3 examples)

Alicia is more than just a supportive partner; she functions as John's "reality anchor". When his mind is consumed by delusions and hallucinations, Alicia provides the sensory input and emotional support that helps him distinguish between reality and illusions.

1. Establishing a reality check through sensory connection: Alicia takes John's hand, places it on her face, and tells him "Maybe the part that knows what's real isn't the head, but the hand." Alicia helped John to shift focus from logic to physical sensations, grounding him in the present moment and providing a tangible connection to reality.
2. Encourage social integration: Instead of letting John at home, she advocated for his return to the university even if he can no longer teach. This prevents isolation, which exacerbates symptoms of schizophrenia, and allows him to maintain a sense of purpose.
3. Empathetic detachment: Alicia recognizes that she cannot cure John nor change his condition, so she eventually acknowledges his pain but not the hallucinations. This means Alicia can support John emotionally while setting boundaries that prevent reinforcing his delusions. This balance makes it possible for John to feel

comfortable and starts reconnecting with reality without feeling pressured.

# Sleep, Dreams & Consciousness - "Inception"

## (2010)

(1) We talked about people's typical "sensory" experiences when having a dream. In relation to this, how do you comment the dreaming experience of the characters in this movie?

1. Visual sensation. The dream world has an impossible architecture and surreal landscapes that defy the laws of physics, such as the folding Paris and the zero-gravity hallway fight. These reflect the brain's ability to create vivid visual imagery without external input.
2. Tactile sensation. Physical sensations like the feeling of falling or hitting water are translated into the dream world. When the mind creates the sensation, the body's actual physical state can trigger sensory feedback in the dream.
3. Auditory sensation. External sounds from the real world (the song) are incorporated into the dream, indicating that the brain brings in external stimuli to create a more immersive dream experience.
4. Emotion. Fear of "projection" is exaggerated in the dream world, and becomes the life-threatening "kick" that can wake the dreamer.

(2) In what way that the Problem Solving Theory of dreaming that we discussed in class can be applied to the movie?

The Problem Solving Theory states that dreams allow individuals to work through emotional conflicts and solve problems in a safe, metaphorical environment.

1. Cobb felt deeply guilty about the death of his wife Marl. She kept appearing in his dreams, becoming a dangerous projection. This represents the unresolved emotional problem that his subconscious is trying to deal with. His dreams repeatedly forced him to face this kind of guilt, which is the prediction of problem-solving theory. His brain uses dreams as a safe space to deal with the trauma that he can't face when he is awake.
2. Fischer's dream revealed his deep desire to be recognized by his father, which is also an emotional problem that he has not yet solved. Through the progression of dreams, his subconscious mind deals with these father-son relationship problems, and finally reaches emotional reconciliation in the deepest dream. So, the film shows how our sleeping brains deal with conflicts that struggle during the day.

Cobb and Fischer both used their dream experiences to face painful emotions and make psychological breakthroughs, which is consistent with the Problem Solving Theory.

(3) What features of dream (as portrayed in the movie) can be explained by the activation-synthesis theory? (min. 2 examples)

Activation-Synthesis theory states that the dream is the brain's attempt to make sense of random neural activity during sleep, so dreams are illogical.

1. Bizarre scene. The sudden appearance of trains in the middle of city streets, or the characters coming from nowhere, can be explained by the brain translating random signals to illogical scenarios.
2. Emotion intensity. The character's extreme fear in the face of absurd threats (snow fortress, van falling off a cliff) is a result of the highly activated emotional centers in the brain during REM sleep.

(4) What elements about dream (in the movie) are consistent and what are inconsistent with our understanding of the brain states during sleeping?

1. In real life, dreams often start in the middle of the action. We usually won't remember the moment we enter our dream. This is consistent with the movie, which Cobb demonstrates to Ariadne by asking if she can't recall the beginning.
2. Instant falling into a dream and long, continuous dream sequences are unrealistic. In inception, characters fall asleep and instantly plunge into richly detailed dreams that feel like hours of seamless and continuous storytelling. This is inconsistent with our understanding, as our brain will cycle through sleep stages, it takes at least 90 minutes to hit REM sleep. Shared dreaming is also unrealistic.

(5) "Dream within a dream", is it possible? Why or Why not? (your answer can be either one but need an explanation) What are the necessary conditions for this to become possible? (free sharing)

Not possible.

1. Dreams are created by the brain during sleep. They are loose and often illogical experiences, but they are not superimposed as in the movie. Usually, unless we have been trained for lucid dreaming, we don't even realize that we are dreaming, even so, we can only experience one dream at a time, instead of having multiple controllable dream levels as in the movie.
2. To make it possible, the brain needs to consciously manage different dream states at the same time, which is the opposite of the way sleep works. In addition, it is necessary to share dreams with others in some way, such as the technological connection between the mind, which does not exist. The closest to reality is lucid dreams, where people can sometimes control their dreams, but this is still just a dream level.

# Interpersonal Relationships - "Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind" (2004)

(1) How did Joel and Clementine first meet each other (their real first encounter, before all the memory erasure procedures)? What factors promote their initial relationship development?

Joel attended the party with his girlfriend Naomi, and he spotted Clementine while she's down by the surf. Clementine approaches Joel and casually takes a piece of his chicken. Then, they bonded quickly over shared feelings of social awkwardness at the party. Later in the evening, Joel and Clementine sneak into an empty beach house nearby. I think it is the opposite attraction and mutual complementarity which promote their initial relationship development. Joel is introvert and quiet, while Clementine is extrovert and unpredictable. Joel may find excitement in his monotonous life and Clementine's chaotic energy benefits from his steadiness.

(2) Zick Rubin (1970) differentiates "loving" from "liking". Based on Rubin's idea, can you a) name one relationship in the movie as characterized by loving, and b) name one relationship in the movie as characterized by liking? (please provide examples or explanations with your answer)

a) Based on Rubin's idea, Joel and Clementine's relationship is loving, they involve deep attachment, intimacy and concern about partners' wellbeing and needs. As Joel and Clementine share very private conversations, care about each other's emotions, and Joel's pain when he realizes he lost their memories.

b) Patrick and Mary's relationship is closer to "liking", which is enjoyment of others' company and admiration, but no emotional investment as "loving" does. Patrick is attracted to Mary and enjoys staying with her, but the relationship is imbalanced, Mary is unaware of Patrick's manipulation, and the relationship is built up on superficial infatuation and convenience.

(3) Using Sternberg's Triangular Theory of Love (i.e., the three components of love), how do you describe the relationship between Joel and Clementine in each of the following stages? a) from meeting each other to becoming a couple (e.g., the first two years), b) after Clementine has undergone memory eradication but before the night Joel going through the same procedure, c) after Joel waking up from the operation but before they found out the truth from their own recordings, and d) after they both have found out the truth.

Sternberg identifies three components of love: intimacy, passion, and commitment. Their relationship in different stages are:

a) Romantic love (intimacy and passion): During the first two years, they are inseparable physically and emotionally. They share deep conversations and strong physical attraction, but their commitment is not fully developed.

b) Empty love (commitment only) for Joel, non-love for Clementine: After Clementine's memory erasure, Joel still has feelings for her and is committed to the relationship, but Clementine cannot reciprocate because she has no memory of their relationship.

c) Infatuation (passion only). Now they both have no memory of their relationship, so they start fresh with strong passion and excitement, growing intimacy, but no commitment.

d) Consummate love (intimacy, passion, and commitment). After they find out the truth, they have a deeper understanding of each other and their relationship. They have intimacy from their shared experiences, passion from their strong feelings, and commitment to try again despite the challenges.

(4) What had Joel said that hurt Clementine the most? Why was that matter? What can they possibly do if they could have a re-run of the relationship?

Clementine is deeply hurt when Joel's memory tape mentions her as “desperate”, saying she dangles sex to get people like her. These words make her feel judged but not loved, and turn her openness into a moral flaw. This matters because it exposed Joel's hidden resentment instead of honest communication. With a re-run, they could rebuild by talking directly about insecurity, using “I-feel” language, respecting boundaries, and avoiding weaponized information like tapes.

(5) After all these, by the end of the movie, what do you think Joel and Clementine have learnt from their experience? What's your prediction of their subsequent relationship development (free sharing)? Why?

What Joel learnt: Risk is necessary for love. Joel is afraid and will always tend to play it safe (Naomi, routine, avoiding confrontation). The memory-erasing procedure was the ultimate "safe" move: remove the pain rather than endure it. By the end, he accepts that pain is not a bug of love – it's a lesson you learnt. You cannot have the highs without the lows.

What Clementine learnt: She is not unlovable – but she makes it difficult for others to reach. The tapes force her to hear her own patterns: the sudden withdrawals, the cutting remarks, the way she uses new personas to escape instead of repair. She learns that her fear of being trapped makes her push people away before they can leave – a self-fulfilling prophecy.

My prediction is that Joel and Clementine will break up at least two more times – and then choose each other again, not despite the pain, but because they now know that pain is the price of being truly seen. They won't be "happy" in the realistic angle but at least they are being genuine and open minded to another – which is much harder, and much more worth it.